



Beekeeping and Wellness for Veterans

By Sharon Schmidt, RN, Psy.D. - President of Cascade Girl organization, a non-profit whose mission is the survival of agricultural pollinators

“I’m kinda scared of them but they are so cool,” said the young woman in front of me. Attired in full beekeeping gear with jacket, headpiece, and gloves, she looked like a real beekeeper, prepared for the task ahead. She and several other veterans who had completed the preparatory, online class were about to make their first contact with managed bees and join the ranks of Oregon beekeepers and pollinator aficionados. With all the buzzing and flying, adrenaline was running high and the task on this particular day was to simply tolerate it, watch and practice what they had learned. We were there to teach and support her.



Beekeeping for wellness has recently gained popularity as a way to help in veterans’ healing processes. However, using peoples’ interests in other living creatures as motivation in mental health therapies is not new. Quite a bit has been written about the therapeutic value of programs that feature working with animals. But, just as there are similarities, there are also differences between caring for or spending time with individual animals and the care required by a colony of bees that are a “super-organism”; a small society unto themselves.

The Beekeeping Program now at White City VA Domiciliary in Oregon is one such program, run by the Recreational Therapy department and taught by retired Sgt. Paul Davitt and board members of Cascade Girl organization led by Sharon

Schmidt who is also a member of Pollinator Partnership’s Bee Friendly Farming Taskforce. However, the history of beekeeping as an intervention in the United States begins with the 1919 publication by the Federal Board for Vocational Education issued in cooperation with the Office of the Surgeon General War Department and Bureau of Medicine and Surgery of the Navy Department. In the text there are references to the usefulness of beekeeping in making an adaptive recovery and increasing self-sufficiency by veterans with physical disabilities. Since that time, beekeeping as an intervention for wellness seems to have made its next significant appearance over a full century later.



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The White City VA Domiciliary program began in 2020 during the pandemic with an online curriculum taught by Cascade Girl organization and started in-person instruction in 2022. It currently has hives on campus and veterans who participated last year have learned techniques to help bees thrive in summer and to successfully overwinter. As knowledge and interest grow it is hoped that veterans will also become a part of the beekeeping community, thereby making new connections with people both on-campus at the Domiciliary and off campus through beekeeping organizations that support this life-giving work.



So, can bees and beekeeping help people heal? Perhaps so. Slovenian culture has a tradition of promoting relaxation by listening to the hum of bees in controlled environments. Hundreds of apiaries dot the landscape and beekeeping is well integrated for both health and agriculture. Simply being outdoors exposes one to certain helpful bacteria (*Mycobacterium vaccae*) that is thought to decrease inflammation - perhaps part of the reason that both beekeepers and gardeners enjoy the outdoors and seem to feel better in the outdoor world.

According to psychologist Shari LaGrange-Aulich, working with bees and beehives can prompt helpful thoughts, feelings, behaviors and skill development. By participating, one must overcome avoidance, get up out of one's chair, out of bed or off the couch. Then, as a beekeeper one comes into contact with dirt, insects, grass, birds, flowers, trees and begins to care about something valued as greater than oneself; something important that requires and actually captures ones' attention. Beekeeping with a group of people who are like-minded introduces a special sense of connectedness and to achieve such a connection, the student beekeeper must overcome more challenges; even face venomous stings and heat! To work a yard together, beekeepers who succeed develop a sense of trust and learn to work together. Beekeepers can become part of a greater community through bee clubs, garden clubs, online groups, farmers' markets. In working bees, they learn how to work without letting emotions rule them and to do so requires being focused in the moment...something we now call "mindfulness".

This month we will begin to teach the next group of veterans with hopes that those who participated last year will return to assist in teaching. This year we hope to involve more veterans in gardening for pollinators. For those veterans who really come to like beekeeping and gardening, these activities can also open doors to professional involvement in agriculture, bee breeding or honey production. But for now, one thing is certain: bees and veterans share the desire to protect home and hearth and from this shared purpose a sense of understanding the culture and needs of another species is built.

Veterans and civilians who would like to participate in growing this program by donating their gardening or plant expertise, mentorship in beekeeping, or expertise in tech or outreach are encouraged to make contact via our website, www.cascadegirl.org

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